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A REVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE UNION CONFERENCE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH AND INTER-STRUCTURAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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Abstract

Over the last few years, a debate regarding the inter-structural relationship of each level of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown to the point where it can be polarizing, regardless of which side of the debate one is on. This tension has likely come about, at least in part, as a response to the ongoing gender role debate, which has given rise to the emergence of an "us vs. them" mentality between those who agree and disagree with the decisions of the General Conference Sessions and its Executive Committee. This paper looks at some of the historical data related to the 1901 reorganization in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This may help alleviate some of this "us vs. them" tension by familiarizing each side with some of the lesser-known historical details so that continued dialogue includes a more complete, common understanding. It evaluates the historical roots from which the Seventh-day Adventist Church developed union conferences, why union conferences were needed, and how they related to the General Conference shortly after their formation. A few discoveries are made: (1) The Seventh-day Adventist Church was a pioneer in the way that union conferences were organized to address the needs of local fields; (2) the reorganization was necessary in order to reach the world more effectively by minimizing the obstacles caused by the limitations and abuse of the centralized decision-making of a few leaders; (3) there appears to have been clear intention that union conferences would remain accountable to the General Conference on matters of policy; and (4) union conference autonomy was built on a foundation of bilateral trust, which was necessary to press forward in the mission of the church. How these discoveries specifically apply to more recent debates are left to the discretion of the reader, though pertinent questions for further evaluation and study are suggested.

Keywords: structure, Seventh-day Adventists, church, authority, union, General Conference, leadership, accountability, Adventist, reorganization.

Introduction

One of the biggest shifts in the organizational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church came with the introduction of union conferences in the

early 1900s. This paper looks at where the ideas for their implementation in the SDA Church emerged from, why they were needed, and what their inter-structural relationship was to the General Conference (GC) in terms of administration and accountability. These questions are important because the way people understand the answers to them in history will inform their perspective on how each level of organization relates to one another today. The need for understanding inter-structural relationships arises out of more recent debates that have resulted from the question of ordaining women in the SDA Church.[1] If there is a sufficient degree of inter-structural independence administratively and union conferences are primarily accountable to their local constituencies on matters of policy, then it follows that they would have enough autonomy to make decisions that might diverge from other levels of the SDA organization without recourse. If, on the other hand, the union conferences are inter-structurally accountable to other levels of the SDA church structure, then to diverge in practice on certain matters of policy would likewise be significant. While the purpose of this paper is not to suggest what should or should not be, this overview of some of the historical data can help add valuable insight into the ongoing discussion.

Origin of Union Conferences

External Influences

The three SDA church founders had religious backgrounds primarily from the Christian Connexion and Methodist Episcopal churches. The Christian Connexion emerged around 1800 as a part of the restorationism movement.[2] They were not officially organized though they had a publication that somewhat unified them. Their only creed was that they had no creed besides the Bible alone.[3] The two SDA founders from this movement were James White and Joseph Bates. Methodism was founded by John Wesley in the early 1700s, and the SDA founder from this denomination was Ellen White. The suggestion may arise that in addition to these two religious streams, there was influence through others who joined the SDA Church as it progressed. There was some Seventh Day Baptist (SDB) influence through Rachel Oaks and Baptist influence through J. H.

[1]In the United States, the Pacific and Columbia Union Conferences have decided to ordain women. In Europe, some conferences have decided to forgo ordination altogether in favor of commissioning both men and women. In each of these cases, the intent is to practice gender inclusiveness in the credentialing process, regardless of the distinction effectively retained during the 2015 General Conference Session where a recommendation to allow divisions to decide whether or not to ordain women was voted down.

[2]George R. Knight, "Christian Connexion," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2014), 702.

[3]Merlin D. Burt, "Development of SDA Theology" (lecture, Andrews Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, MI, February 14, 2018).

Waggoner. Oaks only officially joined the SDA Church during the last year of her life, so her influence was not significant to the structure of the church.[4] J. H. Waggoner died in 1889, limiting his potential influence on church structure.[5]

Among those alive during the 1901 GC Session, there were only one or two individuals who might have imported ideas from another church structure. One of them was W. A. Spicer, who was the son of an SDB minister.[6] He became an Adventist at nine years of age, however, so it is doubtful that he inherited much knowledge of the SDB church structure. S. N. Haskell converted to Adventism at nineteen years of age, but he was formerly a Congregationalist.[7] A. T. Jones studied himself into Adventism while in the army and was baptized during the 1870s.[8] No records indicating any prior religious affiliation could be found for him. A. G. Daniells's mother, Mary Daniells, was a devout Methodist. When she became an Adventist, he followed her in baptism at the age of ten.[9] O. A. Olsen, W. W. Prescott, and E. J. Waggoner were all second-generation Adventists. Lastly, Uriah Smith's religious background is somewhat unclear though it is likely that his parents may have been Baptist before joining the Millerite movement. At the age of twelve, Uriah was "baptized by an Adventist elder early in the summer of 1844."[10] It was not until 1852, however, that he decided to join the Adventist movement.[11]

With this context in mind, where might we expect to find the kind of influence needed to spark the idea for the union conference model in 1901? Since the Christian Connexion Church had no official organization and is still a Congregational church today (known as the United Church of Christ), it is obvious that searching there will likely yield little fruit.[12] In contrast, Seventh Day

[4]Merlin D. Burt, "Oaks-Preston, Rachel (Harris) (1809–1868)," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 481.

[5]Denis Fortin, "Waggoner, Joseph Harvey," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 537.

[6]Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1961–1962), 2:29.

[7]Ibid., 1:217.

[8]Gerald Wheeler, *A. T. Jones: Point Man on Adventism's Charismatic Frontier*, Adventist Pioneer Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2011), 17–18.

[9]Ben McArthur, *A. G. Daniells: Shaper of Twentieth-Century Adventism*, Adventist Pioneer Series (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 20.

[10]Gary Land, *Uriah Smith: Apologist and Biblical Commentator*, Adventist Pioneer Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2014), 19.

[11]Ibid., 23.

[12]The Christian Connexion was one of the Congregational streams that came to comprise the General Convention of the Christian Church, according to John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 390–91. For a simple chronology tracing Congregationalism to the General Convention of

Baptists established a general conference in the United States in 1802.[13] They functioned with a high degree of autonomy, with each congregation being independently incorporated and holding the title to its own property. SDB churches were free to write their own covenant statement, constitution, and bylaws.[14] Ordination, budget, worship, hymnbooks, selection of pastors and so forth were historically coordinated by the local church as well.[15] Over time, there were efforts to bring about some degree of cohesiveness through the formation of associations and societies. Associations were proposed in 1834 so that churches could appoint delegates to their General Conference. The purpose of this was to offset the cost of having to send delegates from every local church, while still being represented in some way.[16] Every association remained completely autonomous, and many churches simply chose not to become members of an association, preferring direct representation.[17] For those who were even more hesitant to join an association, societies arose with voluntary membership open to individuals from any or no denomination. Whereas associations of churches required consensus before acting, societies were often comprised of people with common interests who paid dues to be members. This in turn funded the activities of the society. Most of the work accomplished by the SDB Church since its foundation has been done through these societies.[18] We know that Adventists were likely well aware of the structure of the SDB Church because Adventist leaders including W. W. Prescott, J. N. Andrews, Uriah Smith, D. M. Canright, and James White attended their General Conferences during the 1870s. James White even gave an address on the relations of the two denominations at their 1876 General Conference.[19] No consolidation resulted between the Seventh Day Baptists and Adventists due to opposite views on important doctrines.[20] By 1901, their General Conference voted an amendment to double the number of delegates appointed by the churches, demonstrating an ongoing, almost congregational

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the Christian Church, which eventually became the United Church of Christ, see also J. William T. Youngs, *Denominations in America*, vol. 4, *The Congregationalists* (New York: Greenwood, 1990), 341.

[13]Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 136.

[14]Don A. Sanford, *Greater Than Its Parts: A Study of Seventh Day Baptist Organization and Polity* (Janesville, WI: Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 4.

[15]Ibid., 4.

[16]Sanford, *A Choosing People*, 159–160.

[17]Ibid., 167.

[18]Ibid., 171–172.

[19]*Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America* (Plainfield, NJ: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1910), 1:200–205.

[20]Ibid., 1:206.

autonomy between churches, associations, and societies represented at their General Conferences.[21] To the present day, these organizational dynamics persist, as articulated in their manual of procedures with its heavy emphasis on the autonomy of local churches.[22] The SDB church structure provides almost no comparison to what we see in the 1901 restructuring of the SDA Church.

Methodism, on the other hand, holds more promise for this study, but resources describing their organizational structure in the early 1900s are few and far between. In spite of this, the literature that is available demonstrates that there are some similarities to the SDA church structure. According to Nolan B. Harmon, a "Joint Commission on Union" outlined all duties of the Methodist General Conference and its authority to define and fix the powers and duties of annual conferences, mission conferences, missions, districts, quarterly conferences, and church conferences.[23] In spite of the similarity in terms, this Joint Commission on Union bears no resemblance to the union conferences familiar to Seventh-day Adventists, and the correlation is likely incidental at best. This does not mean that no equivalent was ever formed by Methodism since they did eventually form groups of conferences into the equivalent of what we know today as union conferences. These were also organized by geographic region in what was called the jurisdictional plan. In this case, however, we also know that their structural plans as an organization would have had no influence on Seventh-day Adventism because Methodism only initiated them in 1911. This came an entire decade later than union conferences in the SDA structure.[24] Where we can draw helpful (though admittedly nonconclusive) insight is from the understanding Methodists had regarding their inter-structural accountability dynamics. It is helpful to be aware of the broader evangelical understanding of a structure so similar to ours even though it came a decade later since it is indicative of the general thought of those times. Describing the relationship between the jurisdictional conferences and their General Conference, Harmon writes,

> That of the Methodist Episcopal Church, with Bishop Earl Cranston at the head, suggested that there be five ecclesiastical jurisdictions with the Negro membership of the church in one of these; that each jurisdiction be allowed to nominate (not elect) its pro rata representation in the Board of Bishops; that it should suggest legislative action, and manage its own affairs in all matters not entrusted to the General Conference. The General Conference, keeping its supremacy, was to

[21] *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America*, 1:233b.

[22] "Seventh Day Baptist Manual of Procedures 2015," *Seventh Day Baptist General Conference of USA and Canada*, 2015, D-2, accessed April 8, 2020, http://seventhdaybaptist.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/SDB-Manual-of-Procedures-2015.pdf.

[23] Nolan B. Harmon, *The Organization of the Methodist Church: Historic Development and Present Working Structure*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Methodist Publishing House, 1962), 107.

[24] Ibid., 168.

> manage all matters for the Jurisdictional Conferences, and bishops were to be bishops of, and for, the entire connection. Significantly enough, it was also recommended that there "shall be a Judicial Council elected from the jurisdictions and having all appellate power." The proposed council could, however, be reversed by a two-thirds vote of the Annual Conferences.[25]

Two points are worth emphasizing here: first, it is clear that the Methodist General Conference retained supremacy even with the establishment of a jurisdictional structure; second, any decisions made by the Judicial Council elected from the jurisdictions could be reversed by their Annual Conference. Although jurisdictions were intended to help the church operate more effectively in managing the administration of work in their respective localities (including the electing of bishops), it is clear they were still accountable to the Methodist General Conference. This General Conference would still make laws and govern church-wide matters as the sovereign power in their organizational structure.[26] Even though this information may be valuable to show a trend in thought within Evangelical Christianity in the early 1900s, the specific structural developments in the Methodist Episcopal Church come too late to have had a direct influence on the organizational restructuring in the SDA Church.

From the denominations considered, it would appear that there was little or no clear external influence on SDA union organization. In fact, it is worth noting that the 1901 GC Session minutes do not refer to any other denomination in relation to the discussions held on organizational restructuring.

Internal Influences

Since it seems that there was no outside denominational influence on the union conference idea, the search must turn elsewhere for further insight. Fortunately, there are several sources that talk about where these ideas arose. According to Jerry A. Moon, W. C. White was the first to start talking about a "district" plan.[27] Furthermore, Moon states that according to Gilbert M. Valentine, W. C. White was also the primary "architect of the Union Conference" rather than A. G. Daniells.[28]

[25]Harmon, *The Organization of the Methodist Church*, 168–169.

[26]Ibid., 172.

[27]Jerry A. Moon, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White: The Relationship between the Prophet and Her Son*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 19 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 183.

[28]Ibid., 186. See also Gilbert M. Valentine, "A. G. Daniells, Administrator, and the Development of Conference Organization in Australia," in *Symposium on Adventist History in the South Pacific, 1885-1918,* ed. Arthur J. Ferch (Wahroonga, NSW, Australia: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986), 79.

Where did W. C. White get this idea? According to R. Schwarz and F. Greenleaf, S. N. Haskell spent some time in Europe and helped facilitate a meeting for leaders from the various regions of the field. This meeting became an annual occurrence, and a basic organizational structure began to emerge based on the needs present. Ellen White and W. C. White were able to see how this structure was coming together when they attended in 1885 and 1886.[29] Their visits initially planted the seed that would bear fruit over time as the increasing need arose for a far more efficient means of administration in each part of the rapidly expanding mission field.

In 1893, President O. A. Olsen suggested setting up an administrative organization to work between the layers then in existence (local conferences, missions, and other organizations) and the GC. This further set the stage for the 1901 union conference plan, according to Arthur L. White.[30] During 1894, the first Australian camp meeting took place. This was not just a regular camp meeting, however, since it came to serve a similar purpose as the meetings in Europe in the 1880s. Forty delegates attended from throughout Australia. This meeting formed what came to be known as "the first intermediate entity, the Australasian Union Conference."[31] As a reflection back to this time, A. G. Daniells would later explain in 1913 that it "was for the purpose of . . . dealing authoritatively, administratively, with South Pacific Ocean questions, Australian problems, so that any conference might get this word from a center of authority right there."[32] This union conference would come to be the key model for the 1901 reorganization.[33]

The Rationale for and Implementation of Union Conferences

By the end of the year 1900, the SDA Church had expanded to 75,767 members from 3,500 members in 1863, which is the earliest year for which we have membership records.[34] For some time, the centralization of leadership in such a

[29]Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 252.

[30]Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years, 1891-1900* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1981), 4:61.

[31]Schwarz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 253.

[32]"Conference Proceedings - Thirteenth Meeting," *The General Conference Bulletin Thirty-Eighth Session* 7, no. 7 (May 23, 1913): 108, accessed April 8, 2020, http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/GCSessionBulletins/GCB1913-07.pdf.

[33]Schwarz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 255.

[34]"Church Membership," Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, 2016, accessed April 8, 2020, https://www.adventistarchives.org/church-membership.

rapidly expanding church had been a growing challenge, so when Ellen White shared her thoughts at the 1901 GC Session, Ben McArthur writes that she advocated for shared leadership. She stressed, "There are to be more than one or two or three men to consider the whole vast field."[35] Moon notes that she did not want to prescribe exactly how this needed to be done.[36] As McArthur explains, Daniells then took over from there and suggested the appointment of a general committee that could look at what would need to be changed in conference procedures to bring about a model such as had been so successful in Australia.[37]

It is worth noting the context that led to this point. There were at least two primary challenges hindering the work of the SDA Church at this time. The first was consistent poor decision-making by relatively few individuals at the GC. One such individual was the president of the GC, Elder Olsen, in 1891. Concerning him, Ellen White wrote that God did not sanction his methods and plans and that he was wrong to make positions appear to be the voice of God through the GC when they were arrived at through the decisions of only a few.[38] By 1895, she said, "There is no voice from God through that body that is reliable."[39] In 1909, she clarified such statements by explaining that she only claimed the GC was not the voice of God when only a few men were behind the decisions made. She went on to affirm that "God has ordained that the representatives of his church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority."[40] This is worth noting because it demonstrates an intentional differentiation between the decisions of two or three GC workers and the GC Session with its broader representation.

The second problem was keeping up with organizational needs, given the work's rapid expansion. In a 2017 article explaining the historical need for the unions, David Trim writes that with the GC trying to provide administration for eighty-seven subordinate bodies around the world by 1901, members were increasingly frustrated and the mission was being impeded. As an example of this, Trim shares how A. G. Daniells and others in Australia met with great frustration over the amount of time it took to correspond with the GC headquarters to get matters settled, sometimes as long as nine months.[41] Taking the gospel to the

[35]McArthur, *A. G. Daniells*, 99.

[36]Moon, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White*, 269.

[37]Ibid., 99–100.

[38]Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 17:167.

[39]Ibid., 17:178.

[40]Ibid., 17:215.

[41]David Trim, "Unions and the General Conference in Historical Perspective," *General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter*, August 2017, 2, accessed April 8, 2020,

world demanded the church do a better job. The only way to make that happen would be to rewrite how the organization functioned. This would allow for more rapid expansion and mission growth. At the same time, expanding and reorganizing the decision-making bodies would prevent a small group of leaders at the GC headquarters from processing and making decisions over matters they often lacked sufficient context to understand.

Reporting on the proceedings at the 1901 GC Session, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* quotes A. G. Daniells expressing his vision of what the reorganization could do to solve the ongoing challenges:

> If Union Conferences are organized, a thousand details will be taken from the General Conference Committee, and placed in the hands of the local men, where they belong. They do not belong to the General Conference. . . . Why, my friends, unless God helps us break up this condition and work as we never have before, it will take a millennium to carry this message to the world. We have not begun yet, with the greater nations of the world.
>
> My idea is that the General Conference Committee should leave the details of the affairs of America in the hands of the Union Conferences. They should deal only with the questions that are general, and that refer to the whole world. Of course America is a part of it, a little bit of it, and must have a little attention from this General Conference, but the world must have the attention of this Conference Committee.[42]

In line with this idea, the general committee suggested by A. G. Daniells came to be known as the "Committee on Counsel." Their task was to figure out a way to bring the various lines of work together through a restructuring that resulted in the union conferences we know today. According to Arthur White, the model whereby they incorporated the various lines of work was known as the Robinson plan, based on what A. T. Robinson had done toward organizing the work in Africa.[43] Some of the lines of work that were incorporated into departments under the union conferences included the medical ministry, Sabbath School, and tract and missionary efforts.

Barry D. Oliver explains that even though Ellen White was very intentional about the need for decentralization, "she was careful, however, to stress that decentralization did not mean anarchy. Her calls for representation and

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https://executivecommittee.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ECN-August-2017.pdf. See also "Conference Proceedings - Thirteenth Meeting," 108.

[42]A. G. Daniells, "Notes from General Conference," *Review and Herald*, April 30, 1901, 8.

[43]Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900-1905* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1981), 5:84–85.

decentralization were tempered by the need for unity in the church."[44] The GC, therefore, called for the various international organizations that had worked independently to become a part of the GC as well, including the Sabbath School Association, Religious Liberty Association, and Foreign Mission Board, among others. Each major organization would be represented on the GC committee.[45] The result was an expansion of the GC committee from thirteen people in 1889[46] to twenty-five after the reorganization.[47] This immediately broadened representation and further helped solve the centralized decision-making problem. These plans were so successful that by the end of Daniells's first term, Valentine notes that "he had organized thirteen union conferences, three union missions, and reorganized twenty-three local conferences."[48]

Historical Inter-Structural Accountability

Initial Inter-Structural Trust

The late Gerry Chudleigh argued for the idea that "unions and conferences were autonomous" upon their establishment.[49] This idea is reaffirmed by George Knight, who cites Chudleigh as his source.[50] In particular, Chudleigh argued that the unions "were *created* to act as firewalls between the GC and the conferences, making 'dictation' impossible."[51] This claim has the potential to be misleading if it

[44]Barry D. Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present and Future*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 15 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1996), 168.

[45]White, *Ellen G. White*, 5:91.

[46]Ted N. C. Wilson, "Fearless in God's Name," *General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter*, October 2018, 4, accessed April 8, 2020, https://executivecommittee.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ECN-October-2018.pdf.

[47]"Summary of Proceedings of General Conference," *The General Conference Bulletin Thirty-Fourth Session* 4, no. 2 (1901): 501, accessed April 8, 2020, http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/GCSessionBulletins/GCB1901-02.pdf.

[48]Gilbert M. Valentine, *The Prophet and the Presidents: Ellen G. White and the Processes of Change, 1887-1913: A Study of Ellen White's Influence on the Administrative Leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2011), 218.

[49]Gerry Chudleigh, *Who Runs the Church? Understanding the Unity, Structure and Authority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (2013), 18, accessed April 8, 2020, https://session.adventistfaith.org/uploaded_assets/454468.

[50]George R. Knight, "Catholic or Adventist: The Ongoing Struggle Over Authority + 9.5 Theses," *Spectrum* 45, nos. 2–3 (2017), accessed April 8, 2020, https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2017/10/02/catholic-or-adventist-ongoing-struggle-over-authority-95-theses.

[51]Chudleigh, *Who Runs the Church?*, 18 (emphasis added).

is not framed in the proper context. The context Chudleigh gives is that the member delegates (constituency) of each entity were and are responsible for the election of their respective leaders. He further explains that union conferences had their own constitution and bylaws and possessed the autonomy necessary to oversee work relevant to their fields. While these points are true, they were not without exception, as one might suppose based on this "firewall" idea.

Union conferences were established with a large measure of trust because, as will be seen in the sections to follow, it was understood by both sides that they were naturally subject to GC decisions in relation to any general matters that were brought to a vote in GC Session. This trust relationship developed both ways. The GC entrusted the administration of the work in each geographical region to each respective union conference. The rest of the church, in turn, trusted that the GC would "deal only with the questions that are general, and that refer to the whole world," as Daniells envisioned at the 1901 GC Session.[52] Because the SDA Church had (for the most part) always operated on a basis of trust, it was only natural for the GC Session to assume that all constituents would comply with any corporate decisions. Similarly, it was natural for all constituents to assume that the GC would carry out its responsibilities as articulated by GC Session and GC Executive Committee decisions. Stanley Patterson explains that "because the SDA system is built on relationships, trust, free association, and a common mission, we have survived for 150 years without enforcement."[53] Enforcement typically comes when mutual trust begins to crumble. One could also argue that it was because the ultimate motivation for the reorganization was to enable more effective worldwide mission that trust was a crucial component. This is because the work of spreading the gospel to the world is more than an organization can accomplish merely by managing employees. Volunteers were necessary, and that inherently required trust. The SDA Church as a whole was not yet at a place in history where it seemed necessary to consider what might happen with breaches in trust at any level. Breaches in trust, if any of its entities should choose to set sail in winds contrary to the rest of the organization, were simply not yet precedented when union conferences were formed. At that time, they were far more concerned about the miscommunications, misunderstandings, and lack of familiarity those at the GC had with the local needs of the work in distant fields. As such, the 1901 changes in structure were designed to keep mission at the forefront. Trust alone did not mean full union conference independence and autonomy, however, as will be shown. Perhaps the practical questions to ask here are: How and where has trust been broken, and how can each side work to reestablish it?

[52]Daniells, "Notes from General Conference," 8.

[53]Stanley E. Patterson, interview by author, October 28, 2018.

Initial Inter-Structural Accountability

It is important to recognize the broader context and intentions clearly discernable from that time. Just as a new vehicle's manual might not speak to the specifically nuanced details of how to relate to a variety of unexpected scenarios (i.e., repeatedly bumping your head on the door frame as you enter it), only basic general expectations were in place, without detailed outlines in the policies of the church at this time.[54] It would be natural to expect that policy would be updated to accommodate future conditions that challenged or otherwise differed from the intent originally inherent in this restructuring.

There are several lines of evidence that describe the general tenor of understanding when the structural reorganization took place in 1901. First, the October 2018 edition of the GC Executive Committee (GCEC) newsletter claims that "each union president became an *ex officio* member of the GC Executive Committee. The GC Executive Committee's authority was increased, and the Union Conferences were given some operational autonomy, although *the unions were subordinate to the General Conference Executive Committee—the body that created them.*"[55] This newsletter was released with the intention of clarifying this point so as to demonstrate that the structural hierarchy had been in place all along. Unfortunately, a citation was not provided for this statement, so some searching through the GC Session Bulletin records is necessary to evaluate whether or not each part of it is true.

The 1901 GC Session Bulletin appears to substantiate these points. A brief summary of the GC Session actions recorded by it are as follows: (1) The union conferences were formed by the endorsement and request of the GC; (2) each union conference president was to be elected as a member of the GCEC, and any changes of district territorial lines were to be referred to the committee on constitutions and plans, which the GC Session had also organized; and (3) union conferences were to forward the balance of any income in tithe that they did not find necessary for their own administration so that it could be used to maintain the work of the GC and also to be redistributed to weaker church entities.[56] These three points seem to indicate that the October 2018 GCEC newsletter is not far off, depending on how one understands these actions. Additional perspective is also available from the union conference side of the reorganization.

[54]This claim is easily demonstrated by comparing the 63-page first edition of the *GC Working Policy* with more recent editions. See *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1926).

[55]Wilson, "Fearless in God's Name," 5 (emphasis added).

[56]"Summary of Proceedings of General Conference," 501.

One of the six unions formed within the United States in 1901, the Pacific Union Conference, was proactive about publishing a weekly paper called the *Pacific Union Recorder* right from the beginning of their operation. A brief survey of discussion related to authority and accountability in the issues they released within the first few months paints a clear picture as to how they viewed their relationship with the GC. The first issue that was published states that, while modified, the GC "still continues the center and principal factor in this great work of God on earth."[57] The next sentence refers to the unorganized fields as being a large part of the GC's responsibility. To be fair, though, what the "principal factor" means here is not clearly defined. In the fourth issue, a report is given on the division of the California Conference to form a new Southern California Conference. Interestingly, the constitution for the Southern California Conference clearly stated that no amendment to the constitution could be made that conflicted with the Pacific Union Conference or General Conference constitutions.[58] On a question regarding how to manage and spend Sabbath School offering, issue 10 goes as far as to suggest that churches avoid reallocation of the Sabbath School offerings in order to be in harmony with GC plans even though they technically had the right to reallocate it.[59] Issue 16 refers to the GC Committee as having accepted "the highest responsibilities of the denomination, to see that every feature of the Lord's work is carried out by those to whom the work pertains."[60] Finally, issue 17 contains a statement in the "President's Address" section in which W. T. Knox refers to a decision made "with the understanding that the General Conference would *permit* the second tithe from the conferences within our borders to be used."[61]

As can be seen, the Pacific Union Conference viewed their autonomy as only extending to the point that the unique needs of their mission fields did not run into conflict with the GC constitution. Further, they desired to be in harmony with specific GC plans even when it came at a financial inconvenience in some cases, as the Sabbath School offering decision demonstrates. This clearly suggests that they understood *themselves* to be subordinate to the decisions of GC Sessions and even the plans of the GC between sessions. The thought that union conferences were so autonomous as to be either solely or primarily responsible to

[57]W. T. Knox, "Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists," *Pacific Union Recorder*, August 1, 1901, 3.

[58]C. A. Pedicord, "The Southern California Conference," *Pacific Union Recorder*, September 12, 1901, 4 (emphasis added).

[59]C. R. K., "Query Corner," *Pacific Union Recorder*, December 5, 1901, 8.

[60]A. G. Daniells, "Personal Responsibility in the Sale of 'Christ's Object Lessons,'" *Pacific Union Recorder*, March 13, 1902, 14.

[61]W. T. Knox, "President's Address," *Pacific Union Recorder,* March 27, 1902, 1 (emphasis added).

their constituencies rather than the GCEC and GC Sessions (in matters voted by either body) appears to lack supporting evidence here, especially on matters that were general and related to the whole world, as Daniells envisioned.[62] The evidence at this point in history appears to suggest inter-structural accountability. This should be unsurprising. After all, it was the GC Session that authorized the existence of union conferences, including their boundaries and even policies on surplus income. Such a context simply would not be expected if they were autonomous and independent in a broader sense. At the same time, since GC decision-making was expanded to include voice and vote from these unions on the GCEC and at GC Sessions, this helped further decentralize GC decision-making.

Inter-Structural Relations in Working Policy

In 1922, the GC established a "Committee on Constitution and Working Policy," not to create new methods but to gather the actions that had been taken into a format that could be more easily accessible.[63] This came to be known as the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists,* hereafter referred to as the *GC Working Policy*. The very first edition of this *GC Working Policy* was published in 1926. Since then, it is updated after each GC Session to remain current on the policies that are voted there. Although this first edition came a decade after Ellen White's death in 1915, a consistent continuation of thought from the evidence already evaluated appears to be present and reaffirmed, especially considering the Southern California Conference constitution, which did not allow for deviation from the Pacific Union Conference or the GC constitutions in 1901, as already seen.

In the section entitled "General and Divisional Relationships," the nature of the relationship between the GC and the rest of the church is described as follows:

> The General Conference is not something apart from the churches and conferences and union organizations, but is the sum of all these, the uniting of all the parts for unity and co-operation in doing the work which Christ instituted His church to accomplish. The administrative authority of the General Conference is therefore the authority of the entire church joining together by this form of organization for the doing of the gospel work and the maintaining of the unity of faith in all the world.[64]

[62]A. G. Daniells, "Notes from General Conference," 8.

[63]W. A. Spicer, "Proceedings from General Conference," *Review and Herald*, June 10, 1926, 2.

[64]*Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists* (1926), 17.

The verbiage of this statement is helpful because it indicates that the representative system established by incorporating churches, conferences, and unions into the overall GC structure made it authoritative in those actions which furthered its goals. There was no separation considered possible between organizational levels beyond the understanding that each organizational level was primarily responsible to administer to the missional and operational needs of its respective field. Further, we see that the GC was seen as an administrative authority though local matters would obviously be handled locally wherever there was not a conflict between collective GC Session votes and local activities. Since some matters are significant enough to have worldwide effects throughout the church, it follows logically that such questions would appropriately fall under the purview of the GC Session so that the sum of its entities could work together to determine the way forward.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discover where the idea of geographically organized union conference structures originated in the SDA Church. It has been shown that the idea can be traced to organizational meetings that occurred in Europe, along with the Australasian Union Conference, established several years before. Geographically organized groupings of multi-church collaboration were not unknown to evangelical Christianity, as seen in SDB societies, though full autonomy was maintained by self-governing churches. Furthermore, the Methodist Church developed a very similar structure to the SDA Church in 1911.

Some of the challenges necessitating the 1901 organization were discussed, including the challenge of too few leaders being responsible for too broad a field, along with the problem of distance and communication speed frustrating the work. With the expansion of the GC to include more ex officio members on its Executive Committee, the reason Ellen White had said it was not the voice of God was addressed, at least as long as decision-making continued to remain more broadly representative and free from manipulation. Lastly, evidence for the inter-structural accountability of union conferences to the GC has been evaluated from the perspective of the GC, the 1901 GC Session Bulletins, and early Pacific Union Conference publications. Since their very inception, the union conferences appear to have been representative, interconnected parts of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27; Col 1:18). It seems clear that the relationship of trust established at that point in time included a mutual understanding that, while the union conferences were in charge of the specific, administrative details pertinent to their local efforts, as defined by their constituencies, this was not without inter-structural accountability to the GC. Similarly, the rest of the church trusted the GC to fulfill its role of carrying out its responsibilities over general, church-wide matters as articulated by GC Session and GCEC decisions while leaving specific, administrative matters to the union conferences. In so doing, the SDA Church

could maximize its ability to reach the world with the message of the gospel and Christ's soon return. So long as both sides pursued that mission without going beyond their purview, that trust continued.

Going forward, several questions in need of further evaluation and study are: (1) How should union conferences relate to matters that they and other constituents of the GC contribute voice and vote on? (2) Should union conferences be expected to prioritize uniform practice when votes that affect the church as a whole differ from their own ideals? (3) Should they prioritize their own field in divergence from representative decision-making as they see fit? (4) What implications might such actions have on trust, church structure, and practice in the future? (5) How might the GC balance their responsibility to uphold GC Session and GCEC decisions while recognizing that bilateral trust is crucial to ongoing unity in the church? How these questions are answered will no doubt have a significant and lasting impact on church unity and the continued mission of the SDA Church.